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Farmers off and running in WC

by Dennis Beard--dbeard@journalenterprise.com

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

Heavy rains in March that caused excessive flooding in many parts of Webster County and the surrounding region may have delayed the start of planting season for some local farmers as compared to last year, but they still have plenty of time to get their seeds planted in order to produce a profitable yield of crop, according to Webster County Extension Agriculture Agent Vicki Shadrick and several Webster County farmers who spoke with The J-E on Monday about their planting schedule.

Billy Brown, his two sons, Gary Brown and Rodney Brown, and Gary Brown's son-in-law, Scott McNaughton, operate a family farm in Lisman. McNaughton's son, Hunter, also helps out around the farm most days. They are about two weeks behind in planting this year, and expressed hesitation about planting too much of their seed too quickly.

"The ground needs to be drier, and it needs to be warmer, too," Rodney Brown said.

They began planting on April 23 this year, and all agreed this time last year, they were busy replanting after a late freeze killed some of their crops. Replanting may not be possible for many farmers this year, due to a limited supply of seeds available for replanting lost or damaged crops.

During The J-E's visit to their farm, the family took the time to check the ground temperature near a crop sample they had recently planted. It was in the mid-50's, which Shadrick later said research had determined would be acceptable if that temperature held for several days. However, with a forecast of colder temperatures and a fair chance of more rain, that didn't seem likely on Monday.

Other farmers agreed the ground temperature is their biggest concern right now, such as partners Kerry Winstead and Brian Hornbeck, who plan to exclusively grow popcorn this year, instead of some acres of field corn, as they did last year.

"I've never seen prep work being as difficult as it is this year," Winstead said. "Ground temperature is more important for popcorn (than field corn). The cold weather is not good for us."

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Hornbeck agreed, noting that the gathering of popcorn is a different process than that of field corn, and has to be handled more carefully.

"It combines faster... and popcorn goes by the pound, instead of by bushels," he said, noting that a fuller crop of popcorn is necessary, as a result.

Shadrick said May 15 is the last day most farmers can plant and still expect a profit on their crops without risking a yield loss.

According to information she provided, extensive research has demonstrated that corn planted after May 10-15 can cause a "yield loss" of about one percent per day.

Keith Tapp, a farmer in the Sebree and Slaughters area, was busy at work in his field on Monday as well, as several brands of corn seed were planted in what he and Shadrick referred to as a "variety test." Tapp said the goal of the test is to determine which brands grow best, and research results can be used to help farmers decide what brand of seed to purchase for the following season.

Tapp said this time last year he was very nearly done planting corn, but this year, the Tapp farm has barely seen 20 percent planted of its total expected crop. He said a recent decision to lay ground tile designed to help drain water off the field proved to be a good idea, given the extensive flooding that took place across the region in March.

"That's exactly the reason we can be planting today, because of the tiles," he said on Monday.

Tapp said plans on his family's farm were to continue planting this week as much as possible.

While it's still too early to plant other crops such as soybean, farmers that spoke with The J-E said they didn't expect the delays in planting corn seed to affect the start of planting season for soybean, which usually begins later in May.

"Even if the corn planting was done, we still would wait to plant soybean," Tapp said.

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